

CHESSE, Week 1

After many months of preparation, we're finally on our way, cruising southward towards the rendezvous point with the tuna vessel. The weather has been sunny, with mild seas, and it's getting warmer all the time. Long pants and sweatshirts have given way to shorts and tank tops, and the freezing cold computer rooms have become a welcome escape from the hot sun. We've spent most of our days getting the research gear set up, tested, debugged, and ready. In the mornings, we have practiced deploying the three small boats that will later carry biologists and gear to the backdown area of the purse seine net, where the dolphin sampling will take place. Individual dolphins will be carefully placed into a partially flooded rubber raft along with one biologist, and the rest of the sampling team will measure and collect the required blood and tissue samples from a second raft. To ensure that we are as efficient as possible when the set operations start in a few days, we have spent our evenings on the fantail sitting in the rubber rafts and practicing the entire procedure, including passing tape measures, blood vials, radio tags, tools, nuts and bolts for the tag attachment, and other scientific equipment. We look rather silly, but this is an effective and important way to ensure that we are as efficient as possible when the actual dolphin capture operations start.

The marine life has been somewhat sparse during the transit, but yesterday we saw our first school of eastern spinner dolphins, one of the dolphin stocks we are interested in studying during this project. Several common dolphin schools have come to our bow briefly to check us out, but then kept on moving - they always seem to be in a hurry to get somewhere. And during a small boat deployment, a curious little minke whale entertained the small boat crew for about 45 minutes. Seabirds have been sparse, and were initially limited to scattered storm petrels and a double-crested cormorant that crash-landed on our deck (but fortunately managed to fix his ruffled feathers and fly away again). Today, as our water temperature approaches 30 degrees C (86 degrees Fahrenheit), we're seeing the more familiar eastern tropical Pacific cast of characters, including masked and red-footed boobies, tropical storm petrels, flying fish, and even one green turtle.

More next week...